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Masters warns against league tables

Australia must avoid the allure of simple but potentially misleading approaches to comparing the performances of schools, according to the chief executive of the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), Professor Geoff Masters.

Speaking ahead of the first in a series of nation-wide seminars for school leaders on the use of student achievement data, Professor Masters said Australia had the opportunity to learn from overseas experience and avoid simple but problematic approaches to the construction of school league tables.

Professor Masters' comments follow an agreement in April by the Australian, State and Territory Education Ministers to provide parents, teachers and communities with access to nationally consistent information about each school's results, its workforce, its financial resources and the student population it serves. His comments also follow last week's decision by the NSW parliament to ban the publication of league tables by newspapers.

"Fundamental to the government's transparency agenda is the belief that parents and members of the public should be able to compare schools," Professor Masters said.

"But schools operate in different contexts with students from very different backgrounds. If test results of all schools are reported in a simple league table, it is difficult for readers to know whether differences between schools are due to the quality of teaching or to differences in the populations they serve."

Professor Masters said some countries attempt to deal with this complication by adjusting schools' results for the socioeconomic and other backgrounds of their students. He said that in England, for example, league tables are constructed which compare schools not on their actual test results, but on how much better or worse their results are than expected.

"The more disadvantaged the students in a school, the lower the expectation of their performance. This approach can be misleading. It can lead to the conclusion that a school is performing well, even when its students are performing relatively poorly," he said.

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An alternative, Professor Masters argues, is to report actual test results and, if these are to be compared, to restrict comparisons to 'like-schools' – schools in similar circumstances and with similar student intakes.

"We should not be concealing actual student performance levels and setting lower expectations of disadvantaged students in an attempt to make direct comparisons of schools in very different circumstances," he said. "Real transparency means reporting schools' results as they are – without adjustment – and making every effort to compare like with like and to understand the circumstances under which individual schools are operating."

Other presenters in the national 'Evidence-Led Leader' seminars are Professor Gabrielle Matters and [Dr Neil Carrington](#). Professor Matters outlines important pre-conditions for assessment information to play a powerful role in educational debate and policy: sound assessment instruments and users with the capacity to interpret assessment data. She argues that educational leaders should be taking better advantage of research findings, new technologies for assessment and learning, and advances in educational measurement. Dr Carrington stresses the importance of schools leading the national literacy and numeracy testing (NAPLAN) process within a total school vision, not merely managing testing as an isolated event.

The ACER Leadership Centre is presenting the Evidence-Led Leader Series in partnership with Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA), Australian Secondary Principals Association (ASPA), Australian Heads of Independent Schools (AHISA) and Catholic Secondary Principals Australia (CaSPA).

Professor Geoff Masters, Dr Gabrielle Matters and Dr Neil Carrington will examine the use of NAPLAN data in monitoring and evaluating school performances, the role and use of assessment evidence in enhancing professional dialogue, and school leadership practices associated with improved literacy and numeracy outcomes for individual students and schools.

Seminars are being conducted in Sydney on 1 July; Brisbane, 16 July; Melbourne, 17 July; Perth, 21 July; and Adelaide, 22 July. Further information on the Evidence-Led Leader Series is available from the [ACER Leadership Centre](#).

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Studies of Asia in Australia

Across Australia, very few Year 12 subjects focus on Asia, according to a report completed by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) for the Asia Education Foundation.

The report, *Studies of Asia in Year 12*, by Jenny Wilkinson and Gina Milgate, found that Year 12 subjects are significantly more likely to contain content on Europe than they are on Asia.

Asia should hold particular significance to Australians being educated in a global context. Asia comprises 60 per cent of the world's population and 30 per cent of world land mass. It includes the world's two most populous nations and fastest growing major economies, China and India. The countries of the Asian region are Australia's closest neighbours and major trading partners.

Despite this, Australia is "a society which has historically acted as if the only really important ideas, cultures, beliefs and norms are those with their origins in western Europe and latterly North America," according to the Asia Education Foundation's *Studies of Asia: A Statement for Australian Schools*.

This is reflected in the content of studies in Australian schools today. The ACER researchers found that in practice, it is schools and teachers who select the material that students will study. Teachers are not likely to select material with which they themselves are unfamiliar or may have never studied. They will tend to choose what they know about and are confident of teaching, particularly at Year 12 level, where so much rides on students' results.

What teachers know and teach about will reflect to some extent the content of their own education. If their school and tertiary studies have not included a focus on Asian studies, they may be less likely to incorporate it into their own teaching. It is thus difficult to break the cycle.

The report found that simply making content or focus on Asia available as an option in courses does not stimulate the study of Asia. Many of the subjects reviewed allow for the possibility of content or focus on Asia, but teachers and students do not often choose these options.

Across Australia, there is generally a strong disposition for the inclusion of content on Europe rather than content on Asia, or, for that matter, Africa or America.

In those cases where specific content on Asia is offered as an option, and the rare cases where it is mandatory, the content often has an Australian or Western focus. This is particularly the case for any material relating to war or other conflicts, such as the Vietnam War.

Where content on Asia is included, it generally covers a limited range of countries within the region. There appears to be little opportunity to study anything to do with India or Pakistan.

In Year 12 English, for example, where there are texts with content or focus on Asia, they are often older established texts or texts that relate to war and conflict, such as Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*. Exam marker reports indicate that Asian texts are less frequently selected than other texts.

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In History, courses will often include one or more units which focus on Asia, but schools and students select which units to study from a wide range. The NSW Modern History course, for example, includes many opportunities for focus on Asia. Only two per cent of students, however, chose to write about China and less than four per cent chose India, Japan, Indonesia and Australia combined. Germany accounted for 65 per cent and the Soviet Union 19 per cent.

The ACER researchers conclude that if the education system aims to increase its focus on Asia, teacher education courses should promote specific training in teaching Asia content. Training should also be offered to practicing teachers.

The report also suggests that detailed study guides and resources on Asia could be made available to teachers, and teachers could be encouraged to participate in study tours similar to the Endeavour Program for language teachers.

The full report, *Studies of Asia in Year 12*, by ACER researchers Jenny Wilkinson and Gina Milgate, is available from <http://www.asiaeducation.edu.au>

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ACER UPDATE

Queensland Government accepts recommendations of Masters Review

The Queensland Government announced on 29 June that it had accepted all five key recommendations from a review of the state's primary school education conducted by ACER's chief executive, Professor Geoff Masters. Professor Masters made the recommendations in a report, *A Shared Challenge: Improving Literacy, Numeracy and Science Learning in Queensland Primary Schools*, which was delivered to the Queensland Government in late April.

Professor Masters recommended that:

1. aspiring primary teachers be required to demonstrate through test performances, as a condition of registration, that they meet threshold levels of knowledge about the teaching of literacy, numeracy and science and have sound levels of content knowledge in these areas;
2. the Queensland Government introduces a new structure and program of advanced professional learning in literacy, numeracy and science for primary school teachers;
3. additional funding be made available for the advanced training and employment of a number of 'specialist' literacy, numeracy and science teachers to work in schools (and/or district offices) most in need of support;
4. standard science tests be introduced at Years 4, 6, 8 and 10 for school use in identifying students who are not meeting year-level expectations and for monitoring student progress over time; and
5. the Queensland Government initiates an expert review of international best practice in school leadership development with a view to introducing a new structure and program of advanced professional learning for primary school leaders focused on effective strategies for driving improved school performances in literacy, numeracy and science.

The full report is available at <http://education.qld.gov.au/mastersreview>

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Fair and Flexible Employer recognition

ACER is pleased to announce that it is one of 16 employers to receive a Fair and Flexible Employer Recognition Award 2009–2010, presented by Workforce Victoria and the Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development. Victorian Minister for Industrial Relations, Martin Pakula, announced the awards on 23 June. The Fair and Flexible Employer Award recognises employers who have developed innovative programs in policy and practice that improve the work and family balance of their employees. ACER has been recognised for its many flexible arrangements including part time work, flexible leave, paid and unpaid parental leave, carer's leave and leave without pay as well as flexible provisions for mothers returning from maternity leave and other family-friendly arrangements. ACER's case study can be read on the Victorian Government's Ways2Work website.

Schools First applications to open

Schools throughout Australia are invited to apply for a Schools First award and be in the running to share in the \$5 million pool of award money. Award applications open on 1 July and close on 14 August.

Schools First, developed by NAB, ACER and the Foundation for Young Australians, is designed to recognise excellence in school-community partnerships. It is Australia's largest ever corporate-backed education initiative and is open to all schools around the country. Sixty local Impact Awards worth \$50,000 each are available. The most outstanding state and territory school-community partnerships will receive \$100,000, and one outstanding school-community partnership will be judged the national winner and will receive an award valued between \$500 000 - \$1 million. In addition, a series of 20 Seed Funding Awards, worth \$25,000 each, will be available for schools that require initial funding to get their community partnership started.

To find out more about Schools First and to download application forms, awards criteria, guidelines and Terms and Conditions visit www.schoolsfirst.edu.au or call 1800 649 141.

University students living on campus more engaged: AUSSE

Collegiate education is a growing trend in Australian higher education, and for good reason, according to the latest briefing paper from the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE).

The AUSSE paper has found that university students who live on campus are more engaged, feel more supported, and have better general development.

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